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## **Travel Industry and Missions in North Korea**

### **NK Mission Research Institute, Open Doors Korea**

A while after Kim Jong-un came to power following the death of Kim Jong-il, in the summer of 2012, some interesting photos covered the *Rodong Sinmun*. They show Kim Jong-un, the First Chairman of the National Defense Commission, on rides at the building completion ceremony of Rungra People's Pleasure Ground. The photos loaded on five pages on the national newspaper even captured the First Chairman watching the Pleasure Ground with his wife, Ri Sol-ju. Although seemed quite shocking compared to the past images that had shown by leaders in North Korea, it unveiled the interests Kim Jong-un held on tourist and the entertainment industries.

From his early days in office, Kim Jong-un showed keen attention on tourism and kicked off construction of various tourist facilities such as Munsu Water Park and Masikryong Ski Resort. Following the policy line of the leader, North Korea designated different Tourism Development Zones and turned up the heat for developing varied sightseeing products. Tied with the improved relationship between North Korea and China, these efforts marked tangible achievement of attracting 260,000 tourists as of 2019.

Although North Korea cut off all foreign exchanges for several years due to the COVID-19 pandemic, its tourist industry is expected to regain the boost as the pandemic comes to an end. Especially, the industry gained more significance as a tool for effective foreign currency earning, diverting from intensified sanctions against North Korea. Then, what does the vitality of NK's tourism suggest to us? Specifically, in the view of the North Korea mission, how should we respond to the tourism, a kind of trend with broadened human exchange? With these questions, we would like to dig into the historical flow and prospects of the travel industry in North Korea and the perspective from the NK mission.

### **Historical Flows of the North Korea's Tourism**

Historically, early North Korea was not eager and willing to nurture the travel industry. In the 1950s and 1960s, the regime did not regard tourism as an industry but as mere non-productive entertainment and spectacle. Back then, tourism was propelled for political purposes only to parade the excellence of its socialist system. In particular, worrying about the pollution of its society by capitalistic ills, the NK regime stopped travel from the capitalist states and limitedly promoted tours from few socialist states and nonaligned nations. Internally, tourism had the meaning of exploration and field trip of anti-Japanese historical sites of Kim Il-sung, not leisure.

In the 1980s, however, the NK authorities shifted their attitude toward tourism. From the

enactment of the Law on Equity Joint Venture legislation, the North Korea regime started inducing foreign investments for the first time, and the travel industry was included into the core industries to be fostered. The move showed changes in its recognition on tourism. Such legislation seems to have been affected by the aggravated economic crisis in North Korea and achievements of other socialistic states. For instance, the Republic of Cuba, after its legislation of the Law of Equity Joint Venture in 1982, succeeded in attracting foreign investments. Similarly, the People's Republic of China opened its gates and partially introduced market economy principles by adopting the Law of Equity Joint Venture and operating special economic zones. Such cases presented by other socialistic states brushed off NK leadership's worries about external influence from tourism and made them expect economic achievements while maintaining the system. Although the new law did not bring fruitful results due to excessive intervention of the NK authorities, lacking related system, and inadequate social infrastructure, and the travel industry also did not show any visible development, it is meaningful that the NK regime started to recognize the economic values of tourism.

Still, doubt and anxiety about the tourist industry again proliferated. First, damages following the opening of the 13th World Festival of Youth and Students in 1989 built a negative recognition toward tourism. For the event held as a response to the 1988 Olympic Games, the NK authorities carried out large-scale development to expand Sunan Airport, build Ryugyong Hotel, and construct Rungrado Stadium, and allowed sightseeing to the participants to promote its system. That is, the event and developments were implemented as an investment to the travel industry. Yet, the regime failed to withdraw return due to the characteristics of planned economy under socialism, and soon following the collapse of communist block, rarely produced economic impacts. Some even analyze the loss at that time affected the 'Arduous March.'

During Kim Jong-Il's reign, the NK authorities shifted their ground to negativity toward tourism amid the extreme economic crisis, the Arduous March. It was because concerns on negative influences of the travel industry on the socialist system and ideologies were significantly heightened during the collapse of capitalists states including the dissolution of the Soviet Union and harsh economic environments. Kim Jong-il, even emphasizing self-reliance and the policy line of self-sufficient national economy, tried to minimize the external influence in the tourist industry as well. The NK play "We'll Reminisce over Today" advertised as written under the supervision of Kim Jong-il at that time illuminated life of the main character who works hard to protect the socialist system despite economic plight. In the play, the main character Gang Chanok confronts with her younger brother, Choe Gwangcheon who exhibits a capitalistic view to promote tourism for economic survival and well-being, which is criticized by his sister. Instead, the situation is settled by 'Our Own Way' in unity under the leadership. Even such play

gives a hint of the recognition of Kim Jong-il's regime on opening the gate of tourism.<sup>1</sup>

However, the latter part of Kim Jong-il's reign showed partial shifts in the policy direction. Based on the nationality-first discourse of 'Our Nation First,' the NK authorities initiated the Mount Kumgang Tourist project in cooperation with South Korea. From the perspective of the NK regime, it was an attractive project to successfully raise foreign currency from South Korean capital under the justification of 'collaboration with our people' without additional investments. Mount Kumgang tourism boomed for 10 years, attracting a total of 1,934,662 tourists, until stopped along with the conflict arising from the NK army's shooting at South Korean tourists on July 1, 2008. Although the partnership with South Korea for tourism was halted, the NK regime which had tasted foreign currency earnings from the travel business, turned its eyes to Chinese tourists. Especially since 2010, as the relations between China and North Korea eased, the Chinese group tour of North Korea was allowed in full swing, which rapidly increased Chinese tourism to North Korea.

As such, the NK regime tried to leverage the economic ripples of tourism as time went by but assumed a negative or passive attitude with concerns over the bad effects of tourism on the system. Yet, changes in the NK authorities' perspective toward the tourist industry were revealed after Kim Jong-un seized power. The regime started to regard tourism as an economic issue rather than a political one. Getting out of the former stance to see the travel industry as a tool to propagate the system, it began to emphasize the concept of profits and economy. At the same time, various leisure, experiment, rest, and other thematic sightseeing products such as Mount Myohyang tracking and camping, Pyongyang International Marathon linked tourism, Pyongyang city walking tour, diverse train travel products, and day tour at border area were developed for foreigners, which were hard to be imagined before. Even domestically, paid tours were recommended to emerging capitalists to secure national finance and tours for leisure and resting gained vitality instead of mere field trip and visiting.

The NK authorities are also putting efforts into developing tourist attractions. On October 15, 2013, they completed and opened Munsu Water Park and on January 1, 2014, Masikryong Ski Resort. In November 2013, the ordinance of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly announced the designation of 14 economic development zones, including 5 tourism development zones like the Wonsan-Mountain Kumgang International Tourism Zone. In 2019, the NK regime raised Samjiyon County to the status of a city and expanded existing revolutionary historic sites as well as residential and tourism infrastructures. Also, the next year it opened Hot Spring Tourist Zone in Yangdeok County, South Pyeongan Province. Two years later, it almost completed the exterior construction of the Wonsan Kalma District. Like this, the NK authorities have kept active investments in tourism even until recently.

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<sup>1</sup> Jang, Y. J. (2022), *the Tourist Industry in North Korea*, Seoul=Seonin Publisher, 159-163.

## **The Reason the NK Regime Focuses on Tourism**

There are several reasons behind the attention of the NK authorities to the tourist industry. First is the availability of development of tourism. In the past, the NK regime built an industrial structure centering on the heavy and chemical industry, seeking a self-sufficient economy. However, the self-supporting economic development tied with low technical standards and narrow territory in North Korea caused the vicious circle of high cost and low production. In particular, the manufacturing industry encompassing the heavy chemical industry has seen a sharp decrease since the 1980s. Besides, going through the Arduous March in the 1990s, the industrial structure of North Korea went backward mainly to the primary industries. Even currently, lacking supply of raw and sub-materials due to sanctions against North Korea and its limited facility investments put a hurdle to industrial development.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the tourist industry is suitable for North Korea in various aspects; it does not require special technical abilities or high-end facilities.

Furthermore, the ripple effects of tourism work well with the situation in North Korea. The development of the travel industry entails building social infrastructures such as roads or electricity, which contribute to securing infrastructures for the residents. As it is a representative labor-intensive industry, significant employments is anticipated, too. Also, additional effects as improvements in national images are likely to happen. Such inherent advantages of tourism perfectly fit with the circumstances of North Korea. Tightened anti-North Korea sanctions are another background that makes the NK regime focus on tourism. As the travel industry is not subject to such restrictions, immediate foreign currency earnings through tourism become especially attractive to North Korea.

The main reason for the negative awareness of tourism that the NK authorities held in the past was worries about the influences of the capitalistic society. However, since Kim Jong-il came to power, their perspectives showed clear-cut changes. Rather than coloring political views on tourism, the NK regime focused on getting profitability, lifted various regulations, and developed sightseeing products in areas not opened before. For instance, during Kim Jong-il's reign, a foreigner who wanted to visit North Korea had to go through a picky identification procedure. On the contrary, after the order by Kim Jong-un in 2014, the issuance procedure for a tourist visa was simplified to first accept visa applications and practice censorship later. The change shows that the NK regime views tourism from an economic and industrial perspective, rather than a political one.

The NK authorities are expected to endeavor to vitalize tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not only for avoiding sanctions but also due to the absence of industries to bring growth to North Korea in a short term. Especially as tourism is the focus point of the current

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<sup>2</sup> The same book, 188-195.

leader, it appears the NK regime will keep nurturing the travel industry.

### **Dilemma of Tourism in North Korea and Worries Over Its Increasing Reliance Upon China**

Yet, the future of tourism in North Korea is not that rosy. Interlocking with the political moves of North Korea, the development of the tourist industry presents real challenges to the regime.

First is the recent political trend of North Korea, intensified ideologies and control. Lately, the NK authorities have been trying to establish social discipline by making laws for ideological control and tightening monitoring. Especially, they have been pulling up the reins to block the inflow of foreign culture represented by the Korean Wave. Amid the policy line of intensified control, the tourist industry tends to be not that welcomed since it involves multiple influxes of foreigners and their influences. Still, the NK regime is investing in tourism, which reveals its confidence in the capabilities to handle the impacts of foreign ideologies following tourism. Yet, we believe the NK authorities are not perfectly at ease with the potential side effects.

Secondly, there are difficulties in attracting investments for developing tourist attractions due to global sanctions against North Korea. The NK regime tried to draw overseas investments in Tourism Development Zone as Wonsan-Mountain Kumgang International Tourism Zone, prepared policies and laws and even unfolded activities for investment attraction. However, it bore no fruits owing to the toughened sanctions.

Nevertheless, cooperation with South Korea is still attractive to the NK authorities as they had already experienced interchanges and collaboration for the Mount Kumgang Tourist project. To North Korea, it is easy to proceed with investment and development on the pretext of national cooperation. Similarly, many experts in South Korea mention tourism as a breakthrough in the strained inter-Korean relations and peace in the Korean peninsula. They argue to utilize cooperation in tourism as a strategy of engagement to lead personal exchanges between the two Koreas, maintain a favorable relationship with North Korea, and prevent the NK regime from aggressive military actions. However, controversy persists over whether it is okay to develop such cooperation before the denuclearization of North Korea. Many others present negative opinions that dollars earned from the travel industry would rather help the NK regime to survive the global sanctions and, further, be utilized for developing nuclear weapons. In addition, the collapse of the U.S. and North Korea Summit, following U.S.-China conflicts and a new Cold War in international relations are lowering the possibility of cooperation between the two Koreas.

Amid such an atmosphere, the NK authorities have heavily relied upon China even in tourism. Right before the coronavirus pandemic, most tourists in North Korea were Chinese people. The reliance on Chinese tourists seems to last after North Korea tourism resumes. However, it would be troublesome for the NK regime to depend on China in the tourist industry on top of the

increasing reliance upon China.

Up to now, the scale of Chinese tours to North Korea has been affected by the dynamics in North Korea-China relations. In the 2000s, the partnership between North Korea and China waned following insecurity in Northeast Asia due to the nuclear tests of North Korea in the middle and late 2000s. Accordingly, the number of tourists declined after peaking in 2002. However, in 2009, the tensions were resolved by Wen Jia Bao's visit to North Korea, and ADS(Approved Destination Status) was concluded to designate North Korea as a group tourist destination for the Chinese. Thus, from April 2010, group tours of Chinese to North Korea officially began, and Chinese tours in North Korea skyrocketed. Later after Kim Jong-un came to power, the number of tourists again saw a sharp decline due to weakened ties between the two states and 4 to 6<sup>th</sup> nuclear tests of North Korea. On the other hand, five times of North Korea-China summit from 2018 to 2019 led to an explosive increase in the number of Chinese tourists to North Korea.<sup>3</sup> In short, a tour to North Korea by Chinese people is not an independent business from political situations but more like their dependent variable.

Regarding such phenomena, Kim Hangyu, the deputy department head of KNTO(Korea National Tourism Organization), analyzed that China came to have the upper hand in North Korean tourism.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, regarding the suspension of North Korean tours after the 2000s, North Korea mentioned flood or infection prevention of the Ebola virus and the like as its reasons. On the contrary, China halted the North Korean tour to raise flags at North Korea's first and third nuclear tests and to set the tone for Trump's visit to China. In other words, the Chinese government leveraged tourism to pressure North Korea to stop its nuclear tests. It reveals the fact that consumption by Chinese tourists makes up a large portion of the foreign currency earnings of North Korea, and the Chinese government is using it as a weapon. The NK authorities may not be that pleasant at walking on eggshells around China for tourism as they already rely heavily on it for the national economy.

If the NK regime is unwilling to depend more on China, it needs to lure tourists from different countries other than China only. Nevertheless, it seems long way for North Korea to build a positive image as a tourist attraction to the global society. North Korea is internationally recognized as a pretty dangerous place to travel. The United States has banned travel to North Korea, and Europe and other regions have shown an awareness that North Korea is an insecure place to visit, which reduced tourists to North Korea even before COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> Due to the characteristics of the travel industry, the external image of tourist sites gains importance, which

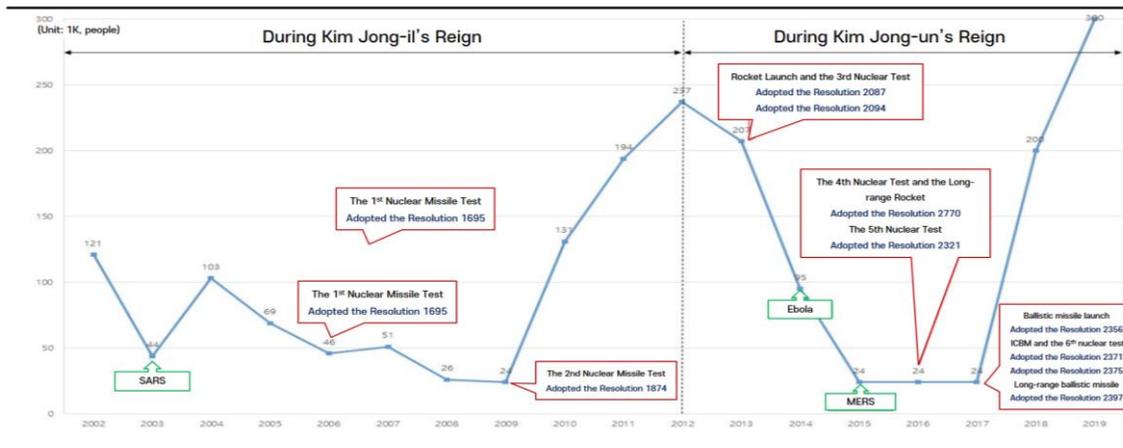
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<sup>3</sup> Lee, J. G. (2020), "Trends and Implications of Chinese Tour to North Korea," Korea Institute for International Economic Policy(KIEP) Basic Data 20-12 (Dec. 28, 2020), 9-10

<sup>4</sup> Kim H. G. (2019), "Trends and Shifts in Chinese Tours to North Korea," KDI North Korean Economy Review July 2019, 29-47.

<sup>5</sup> "The USA Banned North Korean Tour, Affecting European Tourists...Special Insurance Required," VOA Jan. 16, 2018.<<https://www.voakorea.com/a/4209038.html>>

North Korea has damaged owing to repeated military provocations and frequent detentions of foreigners. In other words, the NK regime needs to improve its image as a safe tourist attraction and better relations with other countries, which poses a political issue related to its nuclear development and international relations.



Note: Considering no available data for Chinese tourists to North Korea from 2015 to 2017 and the implementation of global sanctions against North Korea and the prohibition of entry of foreign tourists due to MERS, it applied the number 24,000 of 2009, which is the minimum number.

#### <Trend Analysis of Chinese Tourists to North Korea(Presumption)<sup>6</sup>>

The Professor Kwon Sukdo of the National Institute of Unification Education summarized various issues of North Korean tourism into three dilemmas.<sup>7</sup> First, the inherent dilemma the tourist industry has in the socialist state. If it succeeds, it may weaken the system, and if it fails, an economic burden is given to the system. Next, for the travel industry to prosper, international sanctions must be lifted, which means the NK regime must first give up nuclear and missile development, seemingly musts to maintain the system. In addition, North Korean tourism is closely interlocked with political situations and leans too much towards South Korea and China, repeating expansion and interruption according to political stances. Like this, the vitality of the NK travel industry is not merely an economic and industrial issue but connected with the inter-Korean relations, international political trends, and moves of the NK regime.

Conversely, such dilemmas imply that the revival of the travel industry may bring positive changes to North Korea. For example, if NK tourism bears more achievements than expected, the NK authorities will actively encourage the industry. It suggests a more chance of peaceful gestures than hard-line military moves to improve external images and allure tourists. Also, if

<sup>6</sup> Lee, J. G. (2020), extracted from the drawing on page 10

<sup>7</sup> Kwon, S. D. (2020), "The Tourist Industry Amid the Reforming and Opening Process of North Korea: Dilemma of Opening and Closure," Social Science Discourse and Policy, Volume 13 No.2, October 2020, 155-184.

many foreigners frequently visit here and there in North Korea following the development of various tourist sites, the NK residents may indirectly recognize the existence of aliens. In this regard, interests and studies on the impacts of promoting the development of tourism in North Korea on its national strategies and political decisions must continue.

### **The NK Tourism in the Mission's Perspective**

However, in a short term, there seems no way to settle the dilemmas of North Korea mentioned so far at the same time. Especially, nuclear development and shifts in international political landscapes do not seem a good option for the NK regime to take for now, considering its past moves. Then, the NK authorities will be more likely to promote tourism of the relatively safe Chinese tourists, risking heavy reliance upon for now.

Isn't there any way to utilize these circumstances for the NK mission? Although the South Korean churches are highly limited, the international churches may be able to expand their base on the NK mission. Even if North Korea opens the gate of tourism, it seems impossible for South Koreans to access the North, which is quite frustrating to South Korean churches. Still, in the perspective of the international churches, accessibility to North Korea certainly increases. In the past, many foreign Christians visited North Korea for tour where they encountered how closed the society is and how dark the spiritual atmosphere surrounding the land is. The experiences often made them passionate about the NK mission and devoted to praying and ministries for North Korea. Most foreign churches and Christians may have heard of North Korea on the news only. However, as the old saying goes, "Seeing is believing." If they are able to see North Korea and meet its people face-to-face, it would naturally bring changes in their perspectives to the land. It is hard to develop direct missionary works as tourists. Yet, if the global churches experience the partial reality of North Korea in the corner Asia, and embrace it as their missionary land, it may lay foundation for the NK mission in the future. If South Korean churches assist the overseas Christians to have God's heart toward North Korea and understand and obey the mission, it will hugely grow the capabilities of the NK mission.

In this regard, we would like to note the importance of the 'churches and Christians in China, Russia, and third-world countries.' Considering the recent political moves of North Korea at odds with the overall Western society including the USA and South Korea, Christians from Western countries and South Korea will face difficulties in visiting North Korea for a while, although they have played a pivotal role in the NK mission so far. On the contrary, Christians from China, Russia, and third-world countries on good terms with North Korea can visit North Korea as tourists without difficulties. Besides, although not addressed in this article, North Korean workers or businessmen are highly likely to be dispatched to the regions; if so, the local churches and Christians can naturally enjoy encounters and relationships with North Koreans.

Until now, the coronavirus pandemic has badly affected missionary works through residing in the target country and even the NK missionary field has faced many obstacles. Now, South Korean churches must stand up for the NK mission and try to mobilize the global churches to the NK mission. If South Korean churches help them to view North Korea as a missionary land, the NK mission will hugely expand its territory. The increase in NK tours will surely serve as its momentum.

### **Concluding Words**

So far, South Korean churches have regarded the said former communist bloc including China and Russia or some countries in Africa and Asia, which are on good terms with North Korea, as target countries to dispatch missionaries. In light of the NK mission, however, churches in these regions have high potential. Such churches will be our valuable fellow workers in the NK mission. Unfortunately, still, South Korean churches often show prejudice that Christians in such regions are just people in need, without appreciating them as fellow workers. Now we must make efforts to improve the prejudice and stereotype.

Persecuted churches where Open Doors is ministering are mainly located in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Although these churches have many difficulties and lack some capabilities, they have precious faith which takes the forms of decision and dedication to overcome such hardships and persecution, which are rare to be found in Western churches. The author often hears news of overseas churches and brothers and sisters who hold regular prayer meetings for North Korea even amid serious discrimination and persecution. In doing the work of our God, "who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God (Corinthians 1:4)," North Korea and its churches cannot be excluded. Let us pray that North Korean tourism opens the gate for many foreign churches and Christians to become attached to North Korea and realize visions of the NK mission.

Also, it is notable that the development of North Korean tourism can bring positive shifts in North Korea in various aspects. As mentioned, to improve its external image and lure tourists, the NK regime needs to create a peaceful and welcoming national image than a warlike, provocative, and evil one. Both direct and indirect human interchanges through the tourist industry also make positive effects. We should all pray for North Korean tourism to have a positive influence on the state management and policy directions of the NK authorities.

## **Reality and Prospects of North Korea's Tourism**

**Prof. Nam, Sung-wook(Director, Korea University Institute for Unification and Convergence)**

The history of tourism in North Korea goes way back. The NK regime started tourism in 1956, three years after the Korean War ceasefire, only to promote itself to some socialist countries. Until the 1970s, it kept a cold look on the residents' overseas tourism and foreigners' trips to North Korea as a corrupt form of capitalism. In the 1980s, however, it began to focus on attracting tourists, developing tourism resources, and expanding related facilities, paying attention to foreign tourism as a means of increasing foreign currency income amid the worsened economic difficulties. North Korea's tourism policy can be divided into the Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un eras. In addition, policy efforts of the NK regime to attract foreign tourists can be distinguished by period. The first period (From July 1950 to December 1991) dates back to the 1950s. The NK authorities established the Travel Management Bureau and Chosun International Travel Agency in August 1953, and began promoting international tourism policies by joining the United Nations Tourism Organization (UNWTO) in September 1987. In the same year, Japanese tourists were allowed to visit North Korea for the first time, and in May 1991, chartered flights between North Korea and Japan started operation. Following it, in 1988, Mt. Kumgang International Tourism Company was established. Three years later, the NK regime designated Najin and Seonbong as Free Economic and Trade Zones, declaring the attraction of foreign tourists.

The second period (From December 1991 to December 2011) is after the 1990s. Since 1996, North Korea has developed tour courses for foreign group travelers centering on Wonsan, Haeju, and Cheongjin. In 1998, it offered tour products that allow South Koreans to enter North Korea by sea. In 2003, tourism to Mt. Kumgang via land was realized, and in 2007, tour to Kaeseong City began. However, after the case of the late Park Wang-ja, who was killed by North Korean soldiers while touring Mt. Keumgang in 2008, tours to Mt. Keumgang and Kaeseong City has been suspended until today. In April 2010, Chinese groups officially started tourism in North Korea, and tourism exchanges with other countries began, such as opening air routes between Pyongyang and Shanghai (July 2011) and between Pyongyang and Kuala Lumpur (August 2011).

The third period (December 2011 to present) is after the launch of the Kim Jong-Un regime. Since 2012, restrictions have been eased to allow Chinese tourists to visit North Korea without passports, and in 2013, Pyongseong City in South Pyongan Province, Dongrim County in North

Pyongan Province, Sinuiju and Hoeryong were opened to foreigners. In 2014, a tourism college was established in Pyongyang to continue investing in new tourism infrastructure, such as Masikryong Ski Resort and Munsu Water Park (opened in 2013) and remodeling of Kalma Airfield, along with educational efforts such as manpower training. It designated 13 regional special zones in 2014 and declared three districts as special tourist zones: Cheongsu District in Sakju County, North Pyongan Province, Sinpyeong County District in North Hwanghae Province, and Onseong Island District in North Hamgyong Province. Kim Jong-un stressed that "we should well build tourist zones in various parts of the country, including Wonsan and Mt. Chilbo, and actively promote tourism, and each province should set up economic development zones according to their own circumstances and develop them in a distinctive way." In particular, the tourism area that North Korea shows keen interest in is the Mt. Kumgang and Wonsan international tourist zones, whose announced goal is to attract 1 million foreign tourists annually through an investment of KRW 8.5 trillion (approximately \$7.8 billion) by 2025. The area has 140 historical sites, 10 sandy beaches and lakes, 680 tourist attractions, 4 mineral resources and 3.3 million tons of hot springs.

According to unofficial statistics, the visitors to North Korea were as follows: 194,000 Chinese and 6,000 Westerners in 2011; 237,000 Chinese and 2,200 Westerners in 2012; 207,000 Chinese and 6,134 Westerners in 2013; and 100,000 from China and 4,934 from the West in 2015; a similar figure in 2016. In 2017, it plummeted due to sanctions. After 2020, tours were even completely stopped due to the COVID-19.

There are two sides to tourism in North Korea. In early 2016, an American college student Otto Warmbier traveled to North Korea through Young Pioneer Tours to have a new and unique experience, but was suddenly arrested and imprisoned by the North Korean authorities. He died six days later returning to his home in the United States after being released from North Korea in an unconscious state. The case clearly shows the insecurity of North Korean travel. The 22-year-old young man, who was born into a middle-class American family and was curious about the world, was detained in North Korea for 1 year and 6 months on charges of stealing political propaganda at a hotel under the direction of the CIA. He was subjected to various tortures while in custody, which eventually led to his death. Korean-American author Suki Kim, who published [English Teachers in Pyongyang (original title: Without You, There Is No Us: Undercover Among the Sons of North Korea's Elite)] based on her experiences teaching English at Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, wrote the following in the Washington Post:

"It is a tragedy in many ways. About 5,000 Western tourists visit North Korea each year, and about one-fifth of them are Americans. The Warmbier incident evidently showed how much the North Korean regime disregards human life. His death is a reminder of the devastating failure of

diplomacy with North Korea, as well as a reminder that detaining American citizens is in North Korea's interest. Warmbier, only a college student, may not have known how dangerous the country he was heading. It is the state's responsibility to prevent a second or third Warmbier case from happening in the future.”

Critics of North Korea argue that tourism in North Korea is a very uncomfortable concept. Some argue that when foreigners visit North Korea, the door is also opened to North Koreans who are cut off from the outside world. Yet, it is unlikely that ordinary North Koreans will be exposed to foreign tourists. Pyongyang tourism itself is to visit a few tourist spots designated for propaganda purposes, and it is impossible for foreign visitors to contact North Koreans other than guides. Although travel is said to be mostly safe, the dangers of the police state where everything is under control are hidden and unpredictable. There is also a skeptical view of the “Joy of Tourism” that can be enjoyed in a country like a mega-camp where 25 million residents are confined like prisoners. Some argue that sightseeing in North Korea with a light heart is similar to taking a walk in Auschwitz under the Nazis. Another dark side of tourism in North Korea is its revenue. Critics oppose tourism to North Korea on the grounds that “foreign tourism brings in more than \$43 million in foreign currency to the North Korean regime each year, which is likely to be used to repress the population and build a military force.” Currently, the US government is enacting a travel ban on North Korea, and Young Pioneer, a North Korean travel agency that Warmbier used, is no longer accepting American customers.

On the other hand, people who are curious about the unknown world still take risks and try to advance to new areas. The increase in tourism to North Korea despite various side effects and concerns is the result of a combination of curiosity and Chinese ideological Red Tourism. At the end of November 2018, the Chinese government partially allowed Korean group tours only to Beijing and Shandong, while banning travel to North Korea by residents of other regions except for Liaoning and Jilin. At that time, the United States banned Americans from traveling to North Korea following the death of Warmbier, a college student who visited North Korea. France and the UK have also issued travel restraints to North Korea. On the contrary, China preemptively lifted restrictions. In other words, it gave North Korea regime a breath of fresh air, where all means of earning foreign currency, such as exports of coal, minerals, fishery products, and textiles, were blocked.

The biggest customers in North Korean tourism are Chinese. Until the second half of 2019, before the outbreak of COVID-19, Chinese tourism to North Korea was on the rise with the two summits between Trump and Kim Jong-un, and Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un. After China completely banned group tours to South Korea as a “THAAD retaliation,” charter flights and

online sales of group tour products to the country were not allowed. While Chinese tourism to South Korea has not fully resumed, tourism to North Korea has been prioritized. Many Chinese tourists live in the three northeastern provinces connected to the Korean Peninsula, such as Shenyang and Dalian in Liaoning. Tourists flocked from distant areas such as Beijing and Shanghai as well. Veterans who fought in the Korean War, which China calls the “Anti-US Aid War,” also visited North Korea to reminisce about their youth. Some veterans visited Hoechang County, North Pyongan Province, where the tomb of Mao Anying, son of Mao Zedong, who died in the Korean War in November 1950, is located.

A one-day tour of Sinuiju, where an average of 10 or more 40-passenger buses depart on weekends, is now affordable to Chinese people with higher incomes. The average cost of a one-day tour to depart at 8:00 am, cross the Yalu River, take a city tour of Sinuiju, and return to Dandong around 5:00 pm, is 790 yuan (about 150,000 won). However, when optional items such as purchasing actual tourist souvenirs are included, it goes up to 200,000 won. For South Korean tourists visiting Dandong who cannot tour North Korea, the North Korea-China border tour cost is 100 yuan (approximately 17,000 won). The tourists generally gather at Dandong Station, where the statue of Mao Zedong is located at 8:30 a.m to visit the 'Resist US Aid Memorial Hall', 'Wolryang Island', 'Eojeok Island', 'Guri Island', 'Tonggunjeong', 'Women's Barracks', 'Development Tower', 'General's Villa', 'Hagugyeong', 'Hosanjangseong', and 'Ilbogwa', and then return to Dandong. Another tourist product takes a boat along the Yalu River and sees the North Korean side. Because the river has no borders under international law, in the summer, it pulls the boats close to the northern coast to watch and sometimes throws cigarettes and other items to North Korean guards.

The tourist park where Chinese tourists stay when they arrive in Sinuiju was built in the summer of 2015 by Dandong China International Travel Agency, with an investment of 50 million yuan (approximately 8.9 billion won) on the coast near the Yalu River Bridge. The 'North Korea Shinuiju Landing Tourism Zone' was created to expand Shinuiju's tourism infrastructure, which is lacking in shopping and dining. It was built on reclaimed land made by filling in part of the Yalu River, and the 'Shinuiju Landing Tourist Park' is the Chinese name for the 'Shinuiju Yalu Riverside Tourist Area'. North Korea's *Rodong Sinmun* reported at the time that "a modern comprehensive service base has been built in the tourism service area built along the Yalu River in cooperation with the Joseon Myohyangsan Travel Agency and the Dandong China International Travel Agency." Lee Eung-cheol, Vice Director-General of North Korea's National Tourism Administration, as well as related officials, Chinese officials, and tourists attended the opening ceremony. Out of a total site area of 130,000 square meters, 'North Korean Delicacy Restaurant', 'Bulgogi Restaurant', 'North Korean Agricultural and Marine Products Market', 'International Duty-Free Shop' and 'Coffee Shop' were built in the 8,000 square meter structure

set up in the first phase. The Dandong China International Travel Agency said, "We will revitalize Shinuiju tourism by recruiting tourists mainly from the three northeastern provinces close to Dandong. There are unexpectedly many Chinese who are curious about North Korea."

The NK regime has opened a way to earn foreign currency in earnest by targeting a niche market through tourism. At the third North Korea-China summit in June 2018, Leader Kim Jong-un strongly requested that Chinese President Xi Jinping provide a North Korea tourist card to Chinese people, citing that China was not subject to sanctions against North Korea. The Chinese government accepted North Korea's request and allowed Chinese group tours from September 16th. It was a forward-looking measure announced after Li Zhansu, the third-ranking member of the Communist Party of China, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, visited North Korea as a special representative of President Xi Jinping and held talks with Leader Kim Jong-un. On September 9th, considering internal and external conditions, Chairman Lee visited North Korea as a special representative of President Xi and met Leader Kim to strengthen North Korea-China friendship. China openly expressed its willingness to support North Korea's economic construction with Chairman Lee's visit to North Korea as an opportunity.

Since then, the atmosphere where China primarily supports North Korea through tourism, the "Gray Area" under UN sanctions against North Korea, has begun to be sensed on the spot. Group visits by Chinese tourists to North Korea began at the direction of Chinese high-ranking officials. As the revenue from Chinese tourism serves as priming water for North Korea's economic recovery, tourism is at the forefront to break through the international community's sanctions and pressure on North Korea. Tourism is the only realistic way to earn foreign currency for the North Korean regime, which is under strong sanctions and pressure. The NK authorities are doing their best to attract Chinese tourists, who account for the majority of tourism revenue. Despite international sanctions against North Korea, the regime is managing through the "niche market."

North Korea's position is to do anything that makes money for tourism products. It came up with products such as 'City Air (Helicopter) Tour', 'Pyongyang International Marathon', and 'Taedong River Fireworks'. Numerous unusual products that raise questions about whether these things are possible in socialist North Korea. For example, for a 40-minute Pyongyang low-altitude flight program using helicopters, Mi-17s charge 195 euros and Gyrocopters charge 90 euros. An-24 (or IL-18), a program that circumnavigates all of North Korea, costs 495 euros. The one-hour round-trip program between Pyongyang and Wonsan charges 175 euros for the IL-18 and Tu-134, and 300 euros for the IL-62 and Tu-154. It is a per-person rate, but it seems

that a minimum of 10 passengers is required. It is doubtful who would pay such an expensive fare to board an old Koryo Airplane, but the product seems to have targeted “Aircraft Geeks” who visited Pyongyang from Europe with a romance with Soviet-made aircraft. In 2012, a skiing tour was launched at Masikryong Ski Resort. It is also strengthening publicity for tourism products based on outdated ideologies. In 2012, Korea Konsult sold ‘Tours to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the Birth of President Kim Il-sung’ while in 2011, Young Pioneer Tours offered ‘Tourism products to learn Juche Ideology.’ In 2012, Pyongyang amateur golf tours were also sold. In 2016, a tour to watch an air show at Wonsan International Airport was released, too.

There are about 20 tour operators specializing in North Korea around the world. Among them, the largest travel agencies are Koryo Travel Agency headquartered in Beijing, China, Asia Pacific Travel Agency in the United States, and Korea Konsult in Sweden. Approximate tour costs are \$4,000 (about KRW 4.34 million) for 14 days and 13 nights, \$3,000 (about KRW 3.26 million) for 10 days and 9 nights, and \$2,300 (about KRW 2.5 million) for 6 days and 5 nights, excluding airfare to and from Beijing, China. It is almost twice as expensive as South Korean tour products. Ironically, they are sold at a higher price than South Korean tours even without dumping tourism as in South Korea, as being controlled as a rarity tourism product. North Korean travel products have also appeared in international tourism fairs. In August 2018, during the Thailand International Tourism Fair (TITF) in Bangkok, a Thai travel agency promoting tours to North Korea installed its booth in the exhibition hall on the first floor of the Queen Sirikit Convention Center. Decorated the front of the booth was a life-size photo shot of Leader Kim Jong-un and President Trump shaking hands at the North Korea-US summit in Singapore in June 2018, with the background image of the statues of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il at *Mansudae* in North Korea. The travel agency, which has been handling North Korean travel products for 26 years, used phrases such as “Meeting North Korea for the first time” and “Opening the world of North Korea” in its publicity booth and flyers for travel products. It was to emphasize the unknown tourist destination to the outside world. On the travel agency’s website, a total of five North Korean travel packages were being sold, ranging from 49,900 baht (about 1.7 million won) for 6 days and 4 nights to 72,900 baht (about 2.48 million won) for 9 days and 7 nights. Mostly, from Bangkok to Beijing or Shenyang in China, Thai Airways, the national airline of Thailand, or Nok-Scoot, a low-cost airline, is used. Meanwhile, Air Koryo planes are used for travel between China and Pyongyang. It was not the first time that North Korean products were sold at TITF, a battleground for the Asian tourism industry. However, an official from the travel agency explained that “this is the first time that we have extensively promoted North Korean products.”

North Korean tourism is currently in a state of a lull due to the corona crisis. It is expected to be able to stretch again when COVID-19 is over and North Korea's nuclear and missile provocations subside. Eyes are on whether such tourism will promote denuclearization by creating a peaceful atmosphere and inducing reform and opening, or, return to a passive stance on denuclearization by creating a gap in the pressure and sanctions of the international community.

# Tourism and Development Possibility of North Korea

Kyung-Tae Min (Professor, Korea Institute for National Unification)

## Changes and Recent Trends in North Korea's Tourism

Since Kim Jong-un came to power, North Korea has actively fostered tourism as a major industry for building an economic power nation and improving people's lives. Tourism, once mainly used to promote the system in the past, is now recognized as an industry for foreign currency acquisition. Tourism is relatively easy to promote compared to other industries because it is not significantly affected by economic sanctions against North Korea. It has the advantages of obtaining economic benefits and also improving the external image. If inter-Korean economic cooperation resumes, it is also likely to be the first area to be sought.

North Korea paid the most attention to the tourism industry until it closed its borders due to COVID-19. Even if negotiations with the United States went well in 2018 and 2019, resolving the North Korea sanctions issue would have taken a complicated process and a long time. Thus, the NK regime seems to have actively promoted the tourism industry to overcome the immediate economic difficulties, while designating tourism development zones and focusing on the construction of large-scale tourism complexes.

<Table> Status of North Korea's Tourism Development Zones

| Division      | Location                                    | Name  | Characteristics                       | Key Attracting Industries         |
|---------------|---|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Central Level | Samjiyon City, Yanggang Province            | Mubong Tourism Development Zone               | Professional Tourism Development Zone | Tourism                           |
|               | Wonsan City, Gangwon Province               | Wonsan-Mt. Kumgang International Tourist Zone |                                       |                                   |
|               | Myeongcheon County, North Hamgyong Province | Mt. Chilbo Tourism Development Zone           |                                       |                                   |
|               | Sakju County, North Pyongan Province        | Cheongsu Tourism Development Zone             |                                       |                                   |
|               | Onseong County, North Hamgyong Province     | Onseong Island Tourism Development Zone       |                                       |                                   |
| Local Level   | Sinpyeong County, North Hwanghae Province   | Sinping Tourism Development Zone              |                                       |                                   |
| Local Level   | Sinuiju City, North Pyongan Province        | Yalu River Economic Development Zone          | Integrated Tourism Development Zone   | Tourism & Recreation, Agriculture |
|               | Sukcheon County, South Pyongan Province     | Sukcheon Agricultural Development Zone        |                                       | Tourism, Agriculture, Trade       |
|               | Manpo City, Jagang Province                 | Manpo Economic Development Zone               |                                       | Tourism & Recreation, Agriculture |

|  |                               |                                     |  |   |
|--|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|---|
|  | Wonsan City, Gangwon Province | Hyudong Industrial Development Zone |  | Tourism Souvenir Business, ICT Industry, Light Industry |
|  | Hyesancity, Yanggang Province | Hyesan Economic Development Zone    |  | Tourism, Export Processing, Agriculture, Trade          |

Source: Younghee Kim, "Recent Trends in North Korea's Tourism Industry," 『KDB North Korea Development』, June 2020. Volume 22, Korea Development Bank, p.116.

North Korea's five-year national economic development plan has also consistently included the promotion of tourism and the development of tourist zones as goals in the external economy sector. Efforts are also being made to develop major bases throughout North Korea as tourist destinations. In 2013, the Central Committee of the Workers' Party decided to establish economic development zones tailored to the characteristics of each province, and many of them include tourism development purposes. In 2014, the designation of the Wonsan-Mt. Kumgang International Tourist Zone and the development of the Mubong International Tourist Zone in Samjiyon City near Mt. Baekdu in 2015 were also announced. Kim Jong-un emphasized the active promotion of the tourism development zone project and paid great attention to it by providing on-site guidance to the construction site of the local tourism complex several times.

### Development of Large-Scale Tourism Complex in the Kim Jong-Un Era

The large-scale tourism complexes that North Korea has recently developed intensively include Wonsan, Samjiyon, and Yangdeok districts. The Wonsan area has several beaches and various tourist attractions, including Myeongsasimni, and the Samjiyon area has natural scenic spots such as Mt. Baekdu and Rimyeongsu Falls. In the Yangdeok area, a hot spring-themed recreational facility was built. It is pursuing a policy aiming at economic effects by attracting foreign tourists through the development of such tourist destinations. Considering the geographical characteristics, the Wonsan area is advantageous for attracting South Korean tourists, Samjiyon area for Chinese tourists, and the Yangdeok area for foreign tourists visiting Pyongyang.<sup>1</sup>

**<Table> 3 Major Tourist Destination Development Projects in the Kim Jong-Un Era**

| Division | Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area | Samjiyon City 'Kkuligi'                                       | Yangcheon-gun Hot Spring Tourism District |
|----------|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Location | -Wonju City, Gangwon Province     | -Samjiyon City, Yanggang Province (promoted in December 2019) | -Yangdeok County, South Pyongan Province  |

<sup>1</sup> KDB Industrial Bank, 『2020 North Korea Industry I』, pp. 391-392.

|                               |  |   |   |
|-------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Tourism Resources             | -Myeongsasimni (Natural Monument No. 193), Ullim Falls, Masikryong Ski Resort (completed in 2013)        | Mt. Baekdu Cheonji (Natural Monument No. 351), Imyeongsu Waterfall (Natural Monument No. 345) | -Yangdeok Hot Spring (Natural Monument No. 442), Seoktang Hot Spring (Natural Monument No. 48)  |
| Transportation Infrastructure | -Road: Pyongyang-Wonsan Expressway<br>-Port: Wonsan Port<br>-Airport: Wonsan-Kalma International Airport | -Road: Samjiyon-Hyesan Road<br>-Railway: Samjiyon Line<br>-Airport: Samjiyon Airport          | -Road: Pyongyang-Wonsan Grade 1 Road<br>-Railway: Pyongra Line (Pyongyang-Raseon)<br>-Airport: Adjacent to Wonsan-Kalma International Airport |
| Completion Goal               | -April 15, 2020 (Day of the Sun)   | -October 10, 2020 (Party Founding Anniversary)  | Completed in December 2019  |

Source: Hae-Jeong Lee, "Trends and Tasks for North Korea's Tourism Policy after Reinforcing Sanctions on North Korea," 『Sueun North Korea Economy』, Summer 2021, p.19.

The Yangdok district was completed at the end of 2019, and North Koreans using the hot spring resort were reported several times on Chosun Central TV. Meanwhile, the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourist Area was scheduled for completion in April 2019 but was delayed twice and was adjusted to April 2020. Yet, no news of completion has been heard. The supply of some materials or facilities may have been disrupted in the situation of sanctions against North Korea, but it seems that the completion is delayed in a situation where the influx of foreign tourists is difficult due to COVID-19. The Samjiyon district carried out large-scale construction works, including not only tourist facilities but also industrial and residential complexes. Perhaps that is why the third construction phase was completed in December 2021, later than the original completion target.

### **Priorities for Tourism Cooperation and Linkage with Government Policies**

To promote inter-Korean tourism cooperation in earnest, there are several prerequisite tasks in terms of government policy. Sanctions against North Korea do not ban the tourism industry, but prohibit joint ventures and investment projects, large-scale cash transfers, and other financial, material, and technical support, which restricts inter-Korean tourism cooperation. Therefore, it will be possible to promote large-scale cooperation at the corporate level without fear of violation of sanctions against North Korea only after a full-scale suspension or mitigation of sanctions is achieved. Even if individual tours are conducted, the issue of UNC permission for crossing the Military Demarcation Line and entering the DMZ must be considered. In addition, it is necessary to improve the system to guarantee the personal safety of tourists and to establish a permanent organization to communicate issues related to entry and stay between the two Koreas. Furthermore, it is also important to ensure stability in North Korean tourism facility

investment and to cooperate in sanitation and quarantine to ensure the continuity of tourism cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

To settle these issues, we can approach tourism cooperation from the government's policy point of view. In November 2022, the South Korean government presented a material related to unification and North Korea policy, "Denuclearization, Peace, and Prosperity on the Korean Peninsula," stating that it would focus on improving people's livelihoods as an initial measure when North Korea returns to denuclearization negotiations. It prioritizes public welfare cooperation projects in North Korea, such as health and medical care, drinking water and sanitation, forestry, and agriculture. Later, in parallel with solving political and military issues, it is intended to promote inter-Korean economic cooperation in five areas as ① Support for power generation and transmission and distribution infrastructure, ② Port and airport modernization projects, ③ Technical support programs to improve agricultural productivity, ④ Support for modernization of hospitals and medical infrastructure, ⑤ International investment and financial support programs. Although the content of tourism cooperation was not directly expressed in these areas, it can be seen as essential to fully promote tourism because most of them include infrastructure facilities, the basis of economic cooperation.

### **Expansion of inter-Korean Exchanges through Tourism**

Assuming that political and military tensions on the Korean Peninsula eased and policy priorities resolved, we can imagine a future in which North Korea attracts South Korean and foreign tourists from around the world. North Korea has a beautiful natural environment and various tourist attractions, while South Korea has various experiences and know-how in the hotel/resort/convention business and tourism/recreation fields. If the two Koreas cooperate, the tourism will play an important role in the future economic growth of the Korean Peninsula. If South and North Korean residents meet and exchange through tourism, it will help to understand each other and alleviate social and cultural differences. From this point of view, we should consider the positive role of tourism in the unification process.

From the standpoint of North Korea, which has suffered from the triple highs of the COVID-19 crisis, economic sanctions, and natural disasters, it will desperately need to expand its health

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<sup>2</sup> Lee, H. J. "Trends and Tasks for North Korea's Tourism Policy after Reinforcing Sanctions on North Korea," 『Sueun North Korean Economy』, Summer 2021, pp. 20-25

and medical infrastructure before attracting large-scale foreign tourists in earnest. If inter-Korean economic cooperation resumes, it is desirable to prioritize cooperation to improve people's livelihoods to enhance North Korea's medical system, and then expand to other fields. In addition to medicine and medical supplies support, it is also necessary to review systematic support for the provision of advanced medical technology and facilities and the construction of general hospitals and medical schools. Such health and medical support is necessary for the health of North Korean residents as well as domestic and foreign tourists visiting North Korea. It is important not only from a humanitarian point of view but also from a strategic point of view to secure healthy human resources on the Korean Peninsula in the future.

How about combining Korea's advanced medical technology and health industry know-how by linking health and medical cooperation with the tourism industry? For example, South and North Korea can promote complementary cooperation in developing the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourism District into an international medical and recreational tourist destination. Korea's experience and know-how will significantly help to lure large-scale foreign tourists and smoothly operate hotel, resort, and convention businesses. The future of the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourism District, which will develop through inter-Korean cooperation, is envisioned as follows.

### **[Concept for Cooperation Cases] The Future of the Wonsan-Kalma Coastal Tourism District**

Located at the waist of the Korean Peninsula, Wonsan is a geographically attractive place. As a port city on the East Coast located close to Seoul and Pyongyang, it is easy to connect with Japan and can be developed as a stopover for international cruise ships. Another advantage is that there are many nearby tourist attractions, including the beautiful beaches of 'Myeongsasimni' and 'Songdownon'. In addition, since it is located east of the Taebaek Mountains, it is less affected by fine dust in winter, making it an optimal location for recreation and nursing facilities. It can be developed as a complex medical and recreational tourist destination that combines ecology and tourism with various fields such as health, beauty, medical, spa, sports, recuperation, meditation, and silver town by benchmarking the Mediterranean resort industry developed by combining the tourism industry with various industries. Imagine us enjoying our daily lives at Wonsan International Medical and Recreation Tourist Destination one day in the future.

"Tourists arrived at Incheon International Airport to receive high-quality 'K-Medical' services from around the world. Via the Gyeongwon Line high-speed train, THEY arrive in Wonsan. Cruise tourists who crossed the Pacific get off at Wonsan Port International Terminal. They are diagnosed at the Inter-Korean Cooperation Medical Center in the Kalma Coastal Tourism District, and receive

treatment and rest at the Gamtang Resort in Tongcheon. Experience services such as meditation, healing, yoga, beauty, and health while touring various treatment and recreational facilities and tourist destinations with self-driving shuttles. The elderly in Korea spend their old age by selling silver towns with beautiful beaches. The elderly in Korea buy and live in a room in Silver Town by the beautiful seaside and spend their old age. In the Wonsan Special Economic Zone, inter-Korean cooperation industries specialized in medical care and recreation is nurtured and exported through Wonsan Port..”<sup>3</sup>

If international investment is promoted to develop the Wonsan Tourism Complex, it is possible to secure sufficient financial resources for major infrastructure construction through private investment without government financial input. It is also worth considering applying a special law to the Wonsan special economic zone to allow foreign or Korean investment to buy residential and resort complexes. If the inter-Korean economic development plan is promoted in earnest, it will be able to apply a comprehensive and permanent exemption from sanctions on health, medical and tourism facilities. From the standpoint of the United States, it is possible to improve relations with North Korea while easing sanctions on North Korea from a humanitarian perspective.

As a cornerstone of inter-Korean cooperation, the development of tourism will contribute to peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula, playing a pivotal role in economic development and inter-Korean exchanges. North Korea can acquire foreign currency and achieve economic growth while South Korea can create new opportunities by entering the North Korean market. In this process, exchanges between the residents of two Koreas will activate where mutual understanding and trust will be built, marking a big footstep toward unification. Expanding inter-Korean interchanges can promote North Korea's openness and contribute to improving relations with the international community. At last, it will help North Korea to be recognized as a member of the international community and move toward a better future for the Korean Peninsula through changes in human rights issues and free flow of information.

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<sup>3</sup> Min, K. T. “North Korea’s Development Paradigm in the Era of the 4th Industrial Revolution,” 『National Land』, July 2020 (No. 465), p. 18

# **A Study on Strategies for Unification in the Gospel Through North Korean Tourism**

**Joongho H (Director of Unification Mission Institute)**

## **North Korean Tourism**

### **A View from the Unification Mission**

South Koreans' tour to North Korea started in November 1998 as Mount Kumgang Tour with Hyundai Group allowed their free visits to Mountain Kumgang. Yet, the NK regime very restrictively allowed access to zones in Mount Kumgang and Wonsan, merely at the level of inter-Korean exchanges under control. Furthermore, unfortunately, it ceased after a shooting incident.

**However, the NK tour calls for a deep investigation from the perspective of the unification mission of Christians for peaceful unification and national evangelization than national exchanges.**

This article organizes by period the ideologies and development of NK tourism under 3 generations of Kim rulers. First in 1954 during the Kim Il-sung's era, the strategies for national tourism started to seek solidarity between socialist states. Later, the NK regime legislated the Law on Equity Joint Venture that allowed western investments on the NK tourism in 1984 and established the State Administration of Tourism two years later. In the next year, the NK authorities joined the World Travel & Tourism Council, which is seemingly an attempt to break into the global market. Also, in response to the 1988 Olympic Games held in South Korea, the regime celebrated the 13<sup>th</sup> World Festival of Youth and Students and offered free tour in 1989, which ultimately led to the Arduous March. Moreover, to tackle economic difficulties, the NK authorities carried out experiments by building the Rajin-Sonbong Free Trade Zone and limitedly opening tourism.

Next, the Kim Jong-il regime barred the gate of North Korean tours and this brought the Arduous March, leaving about three million people starved to death. In 1997, Kim Jong-il started to advocate 'Our Nation First,' developed national cooperation between the two Koreas, and tried to overcome the crisis of its social system and economic hardships. Later, as inter-Korean cooperation in tourism was interrupted, the regime began a partnership with China as an alternative.

The tourism policy during the Kim Jong-un reign showed active twists from an ideological(political) tour to a practical(economical) one. Unlatching the door of tours to the global society to overcome the limits of socialist ideologists and find alternatives, the NK authorities have adopted strategies for the

travel industry along with local development. They announced opening plans for regional tourism through seven economic development zones nationwide, of which a symbolic stronghold is the “Wonsan-Mount Kumgang International Tourist Zone.” In addition, Samjiyon City construction has been promoted as a tourism model for the self-sufficient economy. As such, ‘the beginning and development of NK tourism,’ ‘the recognition of Tourism during the three Kim eras: Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong-un’ and the continuity and dynamics of the recognition have progressed.

## Activating Tourism Through China

### Will It Be Resumed Soon?

Recently the NK authorities closed the national border amid the prevalent COVID-19 and stopped trade and tourism exchange with China. However, if the global catastrophe finds a clue to the solution, North Korea is expected to open the door of tourism to the world again. As the NK regime reopens borders to initiate trade, tours will be started soon. The three main reasons are as follows.

**First**, signs of ‘the second Arduous March’ are becoming more visible amid the closure of *Jangmadang* following the reinforced ideological control for social stability. The most urgent and difficult area is Kaesong Special Zone. Without a source of income due to the interruption of the Kaesong Industrial Complex and inter-Korean economic cooperation, it sees more and more victims of starvation that even emergency food for the army needs to be invested in, the internal source said. **Second**, as the economic sanctions by the USA and the Western countries got intensified after the fourth nuclear test of a hydrogen bomb, the NK authorities inevitably had to correct the dual policy of military build-up and economic development. **Third**, the NK regime has been facing more hurdles to communicating and partnering with South Korea as it wishes due to South Korea’s transition to a conservative government, which is hard for the North to overcome.

In his recent interview with Free North Korea Broadcasting(FNB), Greg Scarlatoiu —the Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea(HRNC) in the USA— warned about the second Arduous March of North Korea and encouraged as follows: <sup>1</sup>

*As the North Korean regime has protracted the border closure for the COVID-19 quarantine, North Korea was exempted from the recipients of humanitarian aid from the United Nations for the past three years. “The second Arduous March” is very likely to take place owing to the control, repression, and closure by the North Korean authorities... To prevent such disaster, they must allow market activities instead of oppressing private markets. Also, to receive assistance from other countries and international organizations, the North Korean regime must*

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<sup>1</sup> An interview with Greg Scarlatoiu · the Executive Director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea in the USA (Washington: Radio Free Asia, Feb. 13, 2023) [https://www.rfa.org/korean/in\\_focus/85024-20020708.html](https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/85024-20020708.html) (accessed on Mar. 19, 2023)

*cooperate transparently with them in helping the most vulnerable. Ultimately, if the regime opts for reforms and opening in political, social, and economic areas, the disaster like the 'Arduous March' may not happen again.*

Amid such situations, the Director of Koryo Tour which offers North Korean tours in China said, "China will be one of the last countries to whom the gate of North Korean travel remains opened," revealing that tourist agencies specialized in North Korea tours saw the demand for visits to North Korea did not shrink even during the COVID-19 pandemic. Director Cockerell said, "North Korea tours account for **90 or more percent** of the source of income in Koryo Tour," and "there have been sturdy demands." One of the tour leaders also stated, "Every day I receive inquiries on whether North Korea tour is resumed or not," stating that "currently, there is a waiting list who plans to visit North Korea in order of application if North Korea open borders again."<sup>2</sup>

Korea Konsult, a professional travel agency for North Korean tours, is recruiting participants on its website, promoting Pyongyang tours that start with the Day of the Sun and the Pyongyang International Marathon in April 2023.

To stabilize the system and appease the public sentiment, the NK regime seems to have no choice but open borders and quickly resume frontier trade first. Then, it may be able to avoid another Arduous March through peddlers crossing borders and invigorating *jangmadang*. At the same time, it is anticipated to win popularity and secure social stability by showing the leader's capabilities to overcome difficulties by resuming international tours.

With this in mind, we need to embrace by loving the Democratic People's Republic of Korea where Christians face the most extreme persecution in the world, pray for the land to be recovered and reunified in God, and be strategically ready. This calls for steady and deep studies on the North Korea tour as a periodic strategy for "Unification Mission Through North Korea Tours."

## **Case Study<sup>3</sup>**

### **1) Prayer Movements Through North Korea Tours Risen in the Third Country**

#### **The Eyes of Changsoo**

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<sup>2</sup> An article on Radio Free Aisa (Nov. 24, 2022) [https://www.rfa.org/korean/in\\_focus/85024-20020708.html](https://www.rfa.org/korean/in_focus/85024-20020708.html) (accessed on Mar. 18, 2023)

<sup>3</sup> The following was written in the first person for the nonfiction novel style following the nature of this study.

In the early winter with a snow-chilled wind, I went up the mountain over the Yalu River. The field of Uiju that I have heard over and over was unfolding before my eyes. Choked up, my tears were soaking my cheeks and fluttering in the wind. The overwhelming moment that *Yeonam* Park Ji-won might have felt looking at the vast Manchurian wilderness on a hill after passing Korean Gate came me also with a flood of tears. This is the place where the North Korean bible was first translated in China passed this River and spread over the wilderness by wooden racks on the back of peddlers. Gazing at the waves of the Yalu River where the missionary Underwood set a boat afloat and baptized out of the water for the first time in his honeymoon, I lifted up my hands high to praise God. As I opened my lips and cried out for God, suddenly, one man came up and gripped my hands firmly to lead me into... a valley. Oh, what waiting for me was a group of people praying in a low voice with groans and holding hands up. They were fasting for two days to pray for South Korea to God. For several days, I stayed with them sharing brotherhood in God, and came to listen to a surprising story.

They were devotees of God who were praying for years already. Every Wednesday morning, the community gathered around for three hours to pray to God in Chinese for North Korea. About 30 people were all kneeling down in a well-soundproof space at the back of the building to cry out for the evangelization of North Korea. The scene touched my heart. Every third week, they fasted and prayed in a mountain valley staring at the land of North Korea. They were truly God's Army.

How come this happened? To my astonishment, I found out that **they had group North Korean tours three to four times every year and spontaneously started to apply "March around Jericho" strategies to North Korea.** "This building has three stories with a long and complicated structure to be used as a shelter for people who do God's work for North Korea. You're always welcome." **One of the leaders there was the North Korea tour leader who have crossed the River over hundred times leading the prayer team.**

Years passed. One young married couple in the community who dedicated their lives as missionaries returned from two-year overseas ministry training. "Our missionary training center was established 18 years ago. It has sent hundreds of missionaries in and abroad. All of them are devoted to Muslims in the Middle East, except this married couple. They hold fast to a different calling. Since our training and ministries are focused on the Western world, we cannot care for and guide them. Now we entrust them to you. Please help them well." It was the words from the training director. After years away, technicians in the team have successfully made it into their missionary lands, and a few people are coming and going as traders.

Prayer warriors know the heart of God. Some poor women sold in human trafficking face many difficulties and are sometimes kicked out and wander from place to place. Not knowing when to be caught and cross the threshold of death, they tremble with fear. Even when succeeding in escaping, they have no place to go or stay. That is why the prayer team beautifully serves them as well like the hands and feet of our God, the Father of orphans and widows. Though endeavoring, such ministry is

always like walking on eggshells. Still, after encountering Lord and becoming His brides, their faces became like that of an angel even in hellish life. Fluttered by looking at each other's faces, they are walking the narrow path shoulder to shoulder. Today, carrying a heavy pack, the worker of God again takes a powerful step toward the mountain. Gazing after him, a film of tears coated Changsoo's eyeballs.

May the coronavirus pandemic end soon. May the day come when we cross over the river day and night... Changsoo again looked upon the sky.

## 2) "Preach the Gospel to North Korea" – A Voice Heard Twice

### Eyes of Yeongsoo

During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, great persecution swept Dongmyeong Village, the hometown of Yun Dong-joo as well. A dreadful thing happened. My father, the leader of a local church, was tortured and killed with stones and bamboo spears during a rally. In the midst of rallied people shouting, "Beat him to death!", he was hung upside down with spicy red pepper water put in his nose. At last, he was stoned to death, before the eyes of his eight children. The second daughter later got married to whom was found to have already had the first wife. At a loss for words, she returned to her mother's home only a year later. Cuddling and crying, the daughter and her mother who had broken her back while tortured fasted and prayed for a month. On the last day, the heaven was opened clearly with a soft and gentle voice was heard. "Stand up! stand up and spread the Gospel over Mountain Changbai." Obeying the voice of God, the daughter went on her way. It was six months later that she returned to her mom. "Now there are Christians in the village and we even opened a church. But I don't have *hukou* to settle there. But If I rent a house and open a small store, a temporary *hukou* can be issued. Mom, please come up with some money for the rent." Then, the daughter set off again.

After six months, she came home and met Yeongsoo, with whom she got closer later. It was January 1992 when the first service of *Han* Chinese started at the Yongjeong Korean Chinese Church. At late night, her mother secretly invited Yeongsoo home. He was told how her daughter was doing. All of the eight children of the martyr's family came to become faithful workers of God. At hearing this, Yeongsoo made up his mind to be the eldest spiritual son of the family. Next year, churches were added up to eight. Every valley came to have a church. As Yeongsoo helped this, the worshippers at the home church invited him to learn service and the bible. Then, he heard that peddlers who crossed the river became to believe in Jesus Christ after staying at a church to sleep and eat and hearing the gospel. 'Wow, I didn't know the gospel can be spread to South Koreans!' That was how the North Korean mission of Yeongsoo started.

Three years later, in 1994 when Kim Il-sung died, the number of churches increased to 30. That was when the Arduous March took place in North Korea. This village across the river saw South Koreans come every night to ask for help. At last, one by one, crocks disappeared and clothes, shoes, and anything that could be seen followed. Inevitably, Yeongsoo delivered the news to South Korea and the entire Korean society in the world and jumped into it.

He recorded their addresses for three years and made up a list of names and addresses of North Koreans from a hundred counties. During the Arduous March, those starved to death were over two million, and one million more died of the plague, drought, flood, and missing. Unable to withstand it, 300,000 or more North Koreans made an exodus to China and Russia risking their lives.

Yeongsoo went up and down the Tuman River for dozens of times for seven years in his middle age. He established two joint corporations, supported food countless times, embracing the land with God's love.

### **3) "Send A Missionary to North Korea" --- "No, Lord, I Can't."**

#### **Eyes of Kyungsoo**

Here is a more surprising story. A Chinese brother G, an old friend of Kyungsoo heard the voice of God in the late 1980s during the third revival in China. "Send a missionary to North Korea." However, he waved his hands, denying for three times as Moses did. "No, Lord, I can't. China evangelization is urgent. What do I have to do with North Korea?" Then God vented his anger.

In repentance, G said to God, "Yes, Lord. I am Your servant. But how can a missionary enter North Korea? Even if I make it, how could I preach the Gospel?" Kneeling on his knees, he stayed silent. Then, something crossed his mind. 'Well, I can send a missionary to the border and open a church.' That was how he selected three families and sent them as the first missionaries to the border in 1989. Every year, dozens of Christians volunteered to go there; they got on the train for over 30 hours with rice balls to spread the Gospel to a border town and helped the missionaries to build up a church.

There are 12 bridges across China and North Korea. Five in the Yalu River and seven in the Tumen River (picture 2). About 30 or more percent of the North Korean trade is carried out through this bridge. (Picture 3) A third or more of the national economy of North Korea is centered on here day and night including smuggling through the river. Now on the river are built hundreds of churches. Over 30 years passed. Most of the traders on the bridge are the new generational leaders in our churches. Isn't that wonderful? The next generation of such churches grows up in the central city of China and mainly engages in commercial business and trade. What a mighty army of our God!

No more can be said here. What Our Father God wants is recovery, that is, redemption. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10 NIV)."

## **Concluding Words**

The author prefers the term “unification mission” instead of the “NK mission.” The reason is that the era is changing. It is clear that unification is the periodic mission granted to our people. However, 70 years have passed since the division of Korea. The two Koreas now exhibit distinctive languages, cultures, and ideologies from each other under different social systems. In fact, real unification seems to be attained only after a long time. If we are still hostile, competitive, and pulling down each other in achieving the dream of unification, it may hurt us deeply and disturb the establishment of a unified Korea with reconciliation, forgiving, accord, and harmony.

Building a unified Korea actually requires more time and effort. That is why it is believed that unification is a process where both parties must show mutual respect and conceive ‘unity after unification.’ Rather than sticking to the idea of unification through absorption, the two Koreas must look at each other as valuable partner to fulfill unification. That is the only way how South Korea and North Korea can win-win and embrace one another. If the Gospel unification that we cry out is a coercive approach to preach the Gospel, it is not appropriate. The true Gospel is love and the essence of love is in embracing.

In this regard, the ideas on the theme of this issue, “Unification Mission Through Tourism,” is expected to bring highly significant and positive discussions. Thank you for letting this study be involved.